

Afghanistan faces worst drought in decades, as UN warns 1.4 million people need help



An Afghan girl carries empty containers to collect water, as a younger child looks on, in Sakhi village on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif. CREDIT: AFP

Afghanistan's worst drought this century has left Ghulam and his family with only desperate options.

Month by month he has watched his land turn to dust and his livestock die as rain has refused to fall.

Like thousands of others he has brought his family to the city of Herat, a famed hub for trade with Iran, in the hope the Afghan government can stop them starving to death.

But left in limbo in pitiful roadside encampments, they are considering whether their best chance may now be to leave their country.

North and Western Afghanistan are this year facing their most severe drought in decades as the cumulative effect of several years of low rainfall has seen agriculture collapse.

A total of 20 provinces have been affected, with some of the worst including the

western and northern regions of Balkh, Ghor, Faryab, Badghis, Herat and Jowzjan.

The crisis is another burden on a country still wracked by violence and with a languishing economy.

For many it may be the final straw to push them into leaving Afghanistan, taking a path travelled by millions of their compatriots to seek work and a better life in a neighbouring country or even beyond as far as Europe.



Afghan boy use a water pump to collect water in Sakhi village on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif. CREDIT: AFP

“We are facing catastrophe,” the 45-year-old farmer told the Telegraph last week in an encampment of around 100 families all driven off the land by lack of water.

“I can assure you that some nights, none of these families have even bread to eat, and they go to sleep hungry. If we don’t get help here, we will be forced to go to Iran or Pakistan.”

His despair has meant emigration is not the only desperate measure he has considered he said.

“If I saw my son losing his life because of hunger, I would do everything to save his life.”

“I would join Daesh or the Taliban, because my son is hungry and I will join anyone who gives me money to save my son’s life. Everyone thinks the same.”

Record low snow in Afghanistan over the winter blamed on the La Nina weather cycle in the Pacific, has been followed by rainfall of up to 70 per cent less than normal in some places. Water levels are so low wells have run dry.



An Afghan man pours oil extracted from vegetables with traditional methods using a camel (R) attached to a circular grinding machine in Herat CREDIT: AFP

The United Nations has estimated at least 1.4 million will need urgent food aid in the coming months.

Ghulam, who uses only one name, fled Qaisar district of Faryab province to the Western city of Herat when his family could take no more.

"I had some sheep and farming in my home town. My sheep died and my land is like a desert now. "We had many donkeys, we left them in deserts to die because we had nothing to feed them."

In a neighbouring camp of vulnerable tents, Haji Abdul Ghayoum, 54, from Pashtoon Koot district of Faryab province had also turned his hopes to emigration.

"I lost at least 50 sheep and I sold others to get into Herat," he said.

"I have two young sons who are working in Iran but they cannot feed us.

"Now I am arranging to go to Iran with my entire family.

"Live is too hard here. There is no job to do. And if the situation in Iran is not too good for my family I will decide to go Turkey as some of my relatives did."

Years of war and economic hopelessness have meant Afghanistan has produced one of the biggest refugee and migrant populations in the world.



Afghan farmers work in a field as they harvest wheat in Ghazni province on July 17, 2018 CREDIT: AFP

Millions of refugees settled in Pakistan, Iran and further afield from the time of the Russian invasion onwards. Migrating to Iran, Pakistan or the Gulf to look for work is commonplace and in recent years large numbers have headed to Europe as the conflict with the Taliban has intensified.

Afghans were the second largest group during the recent migrant crisis, with more than 178,000 mainly young Afghan men applying for European Union asylum in 2015 and 183,000 the following year.

People rarely flee the country for one single reason, said Ahmadi Gul who manages the International Organisation for Migration's aid programme in Afghanistan.

Ongoing violence and a lack of employment play a part, but the drought will now add to them, he suggested.

The drought has already seen thousands of families and tens of thousands of people leave their homes and head for cities like Herat.

Iran and Pakistan are not the welcoming hosts to Afghans they once were. Both countries have recently insisted large numbers of refugees return home.



An Afghan farmer works in a field as he harvests wheat in Ghazni province on July 17, 2018. CREDIT: AFP

But the drought has seen many take a chance abroad anyway, local officials said, even if it is only temporary.

“Many people have left the country because of this drought,” said Najib Mohebbi, a member of the city’s provincial council.

“People who cannot leave the country are leaving their homes and going to big cities.”

The scale of this year’s drought is worse than anyone can remember, said another farmer called Bahauddin.

The 43-year-old, from Badghis province claimed his lands had not witnessed a drop of rain.

“I had sheep but most of them died. I lost everything, not only me but also all of these people lost their life savings. We are people with zero of everything.”

“I have received nothing from the government. When we go to the government, they say ‘we will help you’ , but they have been saying this for two months.

“An old man of 100 told me he could not remember such a drought or such a bad situation in our region.”

Source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/22/afghanistan-faces-worst-drought-decades-un-warns-14m-need-help/>

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